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TEACHING THE FRENCH VERB

By HENRY WARD CHURCH

THE following suggestions in regard to the teaching of the French verb are based on several assumptions that the writer considers so obviously true as to call for no discussion. They are: first, that no student can hope to read, write, or speak French with any degree of proficiency until he has mastered the conjugation of the verb and can use the various forms with ease and accuracy; second, that large numbers of students in our schools and colleges fail lamentably in this important part of the grammar; third, that in the eyes of practically all students the verb is the most unpopular and cordially hated branch in any French course; fourth, that the reasons for these last two facts are to be found not so much in the inherent difficulty of the subject, as in the way in which it is usually presented.

In spite of the sweeping changes that have taken place in recent years in modern language teaching, and the great variety of methods now in existence, there seems to be but one method of teaching the French verb, and that one is, generally speaking, the same as it was twenty years ago. At least this is the conclusion that is forced upon the writer as a result of an examination of most of the available elementary text-books, as well as of experience with a considerable number of students who have come into his second and third year classes with credit for French taken in other institutions.

The traditional method of teaching verbs is open to a number of serious objections. To begin with, it is based almost exclusively on the memorizing of forms, and does not sufficiently encourage the use of the student's logical faculties. It discourages the learner from the very outset by piling up form after form, conjugation after conjugation for him to memorize, the teacher usually adding the well-meant but disheartening injunction that if he fails to learn the forms already given him, he is sure to become hopelessly entangled in the mass of more complicated ones that are to follow. To give a concrete example of this procedure, the student is forced

to learn a different present indicative for each of three, or even four, conjugations, no one of which is in any way associated with any other one; whereas it is possible to give him a simple rule by which he may form this tense not only for all the so-called regular verbs, but for almost all others.

Another fault of the usual method of verb teaching is that it seems to take delight in emphasizing irregularity and in minimizing regularity. So insistently is this done that the average student firmly believes fully ninety per cent of all French verb forms to be irregular, in spite of the fact that even a larger percentage of them than that are absolutely regular. The psychological effect of this erroneous impression is obviously disastrous.

A third objection is that in arrangement and classification the French verb system follows too blindly the Latin verb. All the older French grammars, and a few in common use today, give four French conjugations, the only reason for so doing being that there were that many in Latin. Most of the later grammars have reduced this number to three because the number of verbs in the third or *-oir* conjugation was so small. But the old Latin idea of dividing verbs into independent conjugations still persists, altho every teacher of French knows that, given the principal parts, all French verbs are conjugated in one and the same way.

Furthermore, all verbs outside of these so-called regular conjugations bear the disheartening label "irregular." Why is it that *finir* is more easily learned than *dormir*? Simply because the former is called regular and the latter irregular. As a matter of fact, is *dormir* any less regular than *finir*? Historically, *dormir* is the more regular of the two. It has fallen from grace simply because, according to the Latin tradition, there can be but one regular *-ir* conjugation, and the *finir* group came to outnumber the *dormir* group. It would seem that even in the field of grammar there is need to apply the principle of protection of minorities. Similarly, the verbs in *-duire* are in reality just as regular as those of the *rompre* type, and are certainly much more regular than *recevoir*, which is still sometimes given as the model for the regular third conjugation.¹ Regularity, then, seems to be a rather arbitrary conception, and perhaps our ideas in regard to it stand in need of some revision.

¹ See for example the New Chardenal French Course (Brooks).

Is it possible to evolve a method for teaching the French verb which shall not be open to the above mentioned objections? The writer believes that it is not only possible but very easy to do so. One well known grammar, published some twelve years ago² did pioneer work in introducing such a method, and it is strange indeed that this effort seems to have had no influence on later works of its kind.

The chief aim of any reform in verb teaching must be to eliminate as far as possible mere memory work and substitute for it some form of logical thinking. Obviously, the memorizing of verb forms cannot be entirely done away with. But it can be greatly reduced. It is not necessary for a mechanic to learn independently the circumference of a circle two feet, or ten feet, or three inches in diameter, provided he knows the meaning of π and is able to apply it. Nor is it necessary for a student of French to learn independently the conjugation of *finir*, *dormir*, *écrire*, and *suivre*, when there is a formula into which all these verbs fit perfectly.

The forms of a verb fall naturally into two general divisions, the principal parts and the individual tenses. It is amazing how many students there are who have only the vaguest idea that these two things are in any way related. Principal parts must be memorized. There is no substitute for this. The teacher should see that they are learned as thoroly as is the article with every noun. But it is rare that any further memorizing of an individual verb is necessary. The same may be said of the different conjugations. Why do we persist in completely separating verbs like *donner*, *finir*, and *rompre* from each other and from everything else, when every teacher has at his disposal a single formula which fits them all equally well? And not only may it be applied to these regular verbs, but also to at least forty common irregular ones, and this without the slightest variation.

This system for derivation of the tenses is given in some form in nearly all of our grammars. Unfortunately, it is too often mentioned only incidentally, and then usually too late to be of any real service to the student.³ The writer believes that this table

² A French Grammar, Thieme and Effinger.

³ The Thieme and Effinger Grammar already referred to is an outstanding exception to this rule. For a typical example of the usual treatment see Fraser and Squair, §159. Not only is this material given too late, but the treatment of the present indicative is incorrect and misleading.

should be made the backbone of all verb teaching, and that the student should never be allowed to learn individual tenses in any other way. The table is given here, not exactly as found in any one grammar, but so arranged that its application is practically universal.

TABLE FOR FORMATION OF TENSES

1. Infinitive	2. Pres. Par.	3. Past Par.	4. Pres. Ind. 1st Sing.	5. Past Def. 1st Sing.
FUTURE	Stem for all forms below found by dropping <i>-ant</i>	Combines with simple tenses of <i>avoir</i> or <i>être</i>	PRESENT INDICATIVE SINGULAR	PAST DEFINITE
Complete infinitive (less <i>-e</i> in + case of <i>-re</i> verbs).	$\begin{cases} \text{ai} \\ \text{as} \\ \text{a} \\ \text{ons} \\ \text{ez} \\ \text{ont} \end{cases}$		If 1st pers. ends in <i>-e</i>	If 1st pers. is in <i>-ai</i>
	PL. PRES. IND.	to form all the	<i>-e</i> <i>-es</i> <i>-e</i> If in <i>-s(x)</i>	<i>-ai</i> <i>-as</i> <i>-a</i> <i>-âmes</i> <i>-âtes</i> <i>-èrent</i> If in <i>-s</i>
CONDITIONAL	stem + $\begin{cases} \text{ons} \\ \text{ez} \\ \text{ent} \end{cases}$	COMPOUND TENSES	<i>-s(x)</i> <i>-s(x)</i> <i>-t</i>	
Always same stem as future	$\begin{cases} \text{ais} \\ \text{ais} \\ \text{ait} \\ \text{ions} \\ \text{iez} \\ \text{aient} \end{cases}$			<i>-s</i> <i>-s</i> <i>-t</i> <i>-mes</i> <i>-tes</i> <i>-rent</i>
	IMPERFECT INDICATIVE			
	stem + $\begin{cases} \text{ais} \\ \text{ais} \\ \text{ait} \\ \text{ions} \\ \text{iez} \\ \text{aient} \end{cases}$		IMPERATIVE SINGULAR	
			Like 2nd pers sing. above except that <i>-es</i> becomes <i>-e</i> (but not before <i>y</i> and <i>en</i>).	
	PRESENT SUBJUNCTIVE			IMPERFECT SUBJUNCTIVE
	stem + $\begin{cases} \text{e} \\ \text{es} \\ \text{e} \\ \text{ions} \\ \text{iez} \\ \text{ent} \end{cases}$			To form stem drop last letter of past def. 1st pers. sing. (<i>-i</i> or <i>-s</i>)
	IMPERATIVE PLURAL			stem $\begin{cases} \text{-sse} \\ \text{-sses} \\ \text{-t} \\ \text{-ssions} \\ \text{-ssiez} \\ \text{-ssent} \end{cases}$
	stem + $\begin{cases} \text{ons} \\ \text{ez} \end{cases}$			

The writer would like to see the day when the term "regular" will be used to include all verbs which may be conjugated in all their forms according to this table, regardless of whether their principal parts follow the model of *donner*, *finir*, *rompre*, or one of the smaller groups such as *dormir*, *conduire*, or *craindre*, or no group at all, as in the case of *suivre*, *vivre*, *naître*, etc.

The student must develop and master this table slowly, tense by tense, and must have abundant practice in applying it to principal parts as he learns them. When once he can do this, most new verbs will mean for him only five forms to memorize, instead of fifty or more.

But what about the verbs which will not fit into this table?

First of all, note that there are comparatively few of them. The following is a fairly complete list, excluding compounds, for any one but the most advanced student: *acquérir*, *aller*, *apercevoir*, *avoir*, *boire*, *courir*, *cueillir*, *devoir*, *dire*, *envoyer*, *être*, *faire*, *falloir*, *mourir*, *mouvoir*, *pleuvoir*, *pouvoir*, *prendre*, *recevoir*, *savoir*, *tenir*, *vaincre*, *valoir*, *venir*, *voir*, *vouloir*. In other words, our table may be applied without the slightest variation to all but about twenty-six verbs in the entire French language. And its usefulness is not yet over. The student should be taught to proceed with these verbs exactly as he has with all others, i.e., learn the principal parts and apply the table. The only additional step necessary is to note carefully such forms as do not conform exactly to the regular system of conjugation. Such forms will be found to be surprisingly few in number, and are the only ones to which any attention need be paid. The resulting economy of time and effort is obvious. Why need the student be drilled in such forms as the past definite of *courir*, the future of *prendre*, the imperfect subjunctive of *mourir*, etc., etc., when these forms are all as "regular" as any form of *donner*?

In connection with these verbs the teacher can greatly aid the student by calling his attention to the following facts. First: in spite of the prevalent idea concerning French irregular verbs, not a single one is irregular thruout. Many, indeed, have only one or two irregular forms. Second: irregularities, when they do occur, are almost entirely confined to the present, indicative and subjunctive, and the stem of the future and conditional. Third: there is never the slightest irregularity in the past definite or the

imperfect subjunctive, and in only one or two verbs is the imperfect indicative irregular. Fourth: the future and conditional always have exactly the same stem, and the endings of these tenses never vary. It is obvious, therefore, that irregularity in these two tenses can make it necessary to learn only one additional form.

A valuable drill exercise in irregular verbs is to have the student write their principal parts and note under the proper ones all forms which are irregularly derived. The following are a few examples of verbs so treated:

courir future stem courr-	courant	couru	je cours	je cours
faire future stem fer-	faisant pl. pres. ind. vous faites ils font Imperative: faites	fait	je fais	je fis
recevoir future stem recevr-	recevant 3rd pl. pres. ind. ils reçoivent Pres. subj. je reçoive tu reçoives il reçoive 1st and 2nd pl. reg. ils reçoivent	reçu	je reçois	je reçois

Such verbs as *lire*, *mettre*, *résoudre*, etc., when so treated, will show nothing but the principal parts. Whether or not the teacher is ready to accept the suggestion made above that such verbs belong among the regular instead of the irregular ones, a careful distinction should certainly be made between them and such verbs as *venir*, *mourir*, *acquérir*, etc., which are irregular in every sense of the word.⁴

The writer firmly believes that if the French verb is taught by some such system as the one outlined above, the subject will lose much of its terror for the student, and the results obtained will be far more satisfactory. Undoubtedly there are a great many teachers who use a system not unlike the above, but there are also many who do not, and to some of these it is hoped that the above suggestions may not be unwelcome. The writer feels justified in

⁴ Such a distinction is well made in Aldrich and Foster's Elementary French.

thus presenting the matter for two reasons, both of which have already been referred to: first, because grammars that suggest such a method are hopelessly in the minority; second, because few students who come into his advanced classes show any evidence of having studied the verb in any logical, scientific way.

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